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ABSTRACT

The liberal arts are perhaps the most misunderstood and oversold realm of study in higher education. Although prescribed for many ills of the young--vocational uncertainty, lack of motivation, immaturity--they were never meant to solve such problems. Students become frustrated, angry and rebellious when the liberal arts do not live up to the expectations upheld in the rhetoric. If universities clarified what a liberal arts education is, and especially what it is not, both students and universities might be spared considerable grief. In addition to silencing exaggerated claims for the liberal arts, a set of genuine alternatives is needed. This would mean more and different kinds of institutions, especially community colleges, rather than more attempts by existing institutions to absorb every field of knowledge and service in sight. Changes are needed in the framework of society so as to permit more flexibility in both when and how young men and women follow their interests and assume their responsibilities to society. Four proposals are: 1) a domestic service corps; 2) more variety in higher education; 3) lowered financial barriers to advanced education; and 4) provision of more education at an earlier level. Such programs would be expensive, but they are preferable to living in a society increasingly characterized by cynicism, frustration, hate and despair. (DS)

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Address by Lloyd H. Elliott, president of
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Education: Limits of Relevance and Choice

"I would found an institution where any person may find study in any subject." So said Ezra Cornell in founding Cornell University in 1865. A century later Clark Kerr made almost the same statement in a different way. Instead of calling it an "institution," that is, a "university," Kerr had to coin a new term, for a new institution — the "Multiversity." If Ezra Cornell's statement was made in a spirit of optimism and a flush of hope, and Clark Kerr's in an acknowledgement of a fact with a suggestion of its implications, neither Cornell's prescription, nor Kerr's diagnosis, now seems adequate treatment for the patient. Ezra Cornell could not have forseen the deluge of "subjects," whether academic disciplines or areas of knowledge which now exist, and Clark Kerr could not have forseen how his incisive analysis would be used by conservatives, liberals, and radicals to attack his conclusions and recommendations.

At a time when knowledge is increasing exponentially it is doubtful if any "...versity" - university, multiversity, or even (one hates to suggest the term) megaversity - can match its conscious or unconscious rhetoric with what may be needed. On paper at least it is possible to add endlessly to the scope and functions of the university, but perhaps we should more closely examine the trunk before engrafting more appendages.

The liberal arts has been, and largely still is, considered the spine in the structure of the university, even of the multiversity. But in spite of the long tradition and following of the liberal arts, perhaps it is the most misunderstood, misapplied, and oversold realm of study in higher education. The day of the "gentlemen's C," a grade that implies a certain intelligence under minimal strain, is past, but the liberal arts is still used as a kind of academic way station for those between adolescence and adulthood. Professors, administrators, parents and politicians have strongly urged study of the liberal arts on the student who is uncertain of his interests, is not yet ready to select a life's work, is not strongly motivated in one particular direction or another, the student who ought to get away from home for a few years in order to mature, or is simply fed up with the limitations of his neighborhood or home town. The liberal arts has been offered as the answer for the student who is too young and economically insecure for marriage, who has already caused his parents more worry than they can stand, who faces such unhappy alternatives as the vagaries of the draft and the unavailability of constructive and satisfying work.

The liberal arts has never meant to solve any, much less all, such problems, yet on we go dispensing the same prescription. We may even come close to literal quackery by both prescribing and advertising. In our speeches, and in our publications, in public and in private, we are pedaling academic snake oil. To be sure, we have sold and oversold the liberal arts in a genteel and, on ocasion, eloquent fashion, but that success has helped create the conditions for failure.

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The case history of the confused, frustrated, and angry freshman is all too familiar. Not seeing any other practical alternative he entered the university unmotivated or having had his real motivations stifled. He was told, maybe superficially convinced, that he would be rounded out, filled up or otherwise made fit for the adult world. By Thanksgiving he is well on the way to academic frustration and possible failure, accompanied by personal disorientation. When the failure becomes apparent, his parents may blame the university for not understanding the young. Blame may be due, not so much for a lack of understanding, but for the university's not having clearly defined what a liberal arts education is and, especially, what it is not.

Failure is a kind of silent rebellion. Overt student rebellion has many and various causes, but a contributing cause is surely what the young see as hypocrisy, failure to deliver on our rhetoric. And descriptions of the virtues and values of the liberal arts are usually well larded with rhetoric. We perhaps delude ourselves as well, for if pressed we would acknowledge that we are talking about an ideal of the liberal arts, and not what goes on at an eleven o'clock lecture on European history. Of the other student complaints about the liberal arts, two stand out. The first complaint is that most academic subjects are not relevant. If relevance is understood to mean that which is both contemporary and immediately applicable, the charge is accurate. Most work in the liberal arts does not meet those criteria, nor is it designed to. A second, and seemingly contradictory complaint, is that undergraduate education is "careerist," that it forces students into a predetermined mold and stamps them out alike. This complaint seems not to be a criticism of content - at least in the liberal arts - so much as a criticism of form and structure. Students may feel they have been put on a straight track they can't get off and told that only the destination is of importance, not the quality of the trip or what might be interesting along the way. The student may wander into this tangle of mutual misunderstanding and become convinced that what needs to be done is to mold the institution to his needs, to make the liberal arts over to conform to his desires.

While the conflict that arises may produce some healthy by-products, more often it ends with the rebelling students not satisfied and the liberal arts in a state of confusion. If universities made clear what the liberal arts are not, both students and universities might be spared considerable grief.

There is another insidious effect of years of official rhetoric about the liberal arts. Many believe that a man who would call himself educated has no alternative but the liberal arts, preferably at one of the "best" schools. It matters little that the "best" schools are such because they have the best students, the implication is that exposure to the liberal arts will somehow transform a student into a contemporary Renaissance man. The plain fact is that universities change students very little. Perhaps a student's intellectual direction can be changed, but it is rare that a university changes his temperament or character. Putting aside the modern mythology about the liberal arts is a difficult business made worse when the idea of an education for gentlemen of leisure still persists as a kind of latent snobbery.

What is badly needed, aside from silencing exaggerated claims for the liberal arts, is a set of alternatives both in education and beyond so that young people have the opportunity to make some real and not just apparent choices. In education

that means more and different kinds of institutions rather than attempts by existing institutions to appropriate every field of knowledge in sight. The newest and most promising educational institution on the American scene is the "community college." It has various forms and various names, but it is now being established in most parts of the country. Unencumbered, as yet, by excessive tradition or rhetoric, it is proving to be one of the most flexible of all institutions of higher learning and adult education, and its promise should be supported. Part of the success of the community colleges' growth is born out of the limitations of four-year colleges and universities, which are now under great pressure tc meet society's demands, to add new subject matter, to provide certain community services -- demands that the four-year colleges are simply not equipped to meet for they do not have the resources to add the new while keeping the old. With moral and financial commitments already made to both faculty and to programs, most liberal arts colleges can accomodate honors programs, independent study, interdisciplinary courses and other liberalizing procedures much more easily than they can accomodate new departments, new educational action programs, or a whole reordering of their purposes. There is no doubt that society has immediate problems which education combined with action can help resolve, problems that are often critical to the social, policical, economic, and cultural development of men and their communities. The broadly based community college seems best able to fill such needs, and where a college or university is not filling them, the establishment of such a community college may be a far better answer than the changing of the already existing institutions to perform so many new functions.

Educational opportunity in the United States ought to mean the availability of a broad range of choices within reach of all college-age students and adults. Such availability can be provided by giving needy students financial aid sufficient to increase their mobility or by providing different programs and different institutions within the reach of each community. American education has always been noted for its diversity, yet at no time has the further expansion of that diversity been so essential. Wide choice for the broadest possible range of ability, interest, and achievement is the only reasonable answer to present demands for open admission, remedial programs, and community involvement.

Through diversity, institutions may complement each others' objectives, while for each institution to try to do a little bit of everything may produce self-defeating conflicts.

An example of these conflicting objectives may be seen now at George Washington. For the past three years we have been striving mightly to put together a financial package which would permit the construction of a new University Library. There seems to be little argument at George Washington but that such a facility is, and must continue to be, the priority of the University's development program. We recognize that our present Library is inadequate for today's programs. For the University to change its priorities in the face of social and political pressure so that such resources would be diverted to new programs for disadvantaged citizens or to Community Action Programs in Metropolitan Washington would simply be acceptance of the fact that George Washington is going to offer a lower level of educational experience in the future than in the past, that its limited resources (which at best would be only a drop in the bucket) will be put to use to meet crises that the people of the entire country must meet through the avenues of

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local, state and national governments. In reality the efforts of George Washington and other private institutions could be a disservice inasmuch as all such efforts combined would fall woefully short of the needs while giving the impression that problems were being resolved.

As changes are needed in higher education in order to offer a greater variety of opportunity so, also, are changes needed in the framework of society at large so as to permit more flexibility in both <u>when</u> and <u>how</u> young men and women follow their interests and assume their responsibilities to society. For example, military service through the draft is now punitive rather that honorable because it says to young men after high school, "Go to college now or be drafted now." The draft, as presently legislated and administered denies all that we know about individual differences — differences in interest, motivation, achievement, ability, finances, maturity, health, and all the rest. Even work, no matter how meaningful or timely, cannot be substituted for the college report to the local draft board of "registered and in good standing."

To get greater participation of the young in the worthwhile domestic efforts, to offer constructive outlets in place of punitive service, to bring closer to reality the equality of opportunity along with the obligations of citizenship and, in sum, to reduce the difference between the dreams and the achievements of Americans, the following proposals are suggested:

<u>A Domestic Service Corps</u>. Young men and women, following high school graduation or at some time before reaching 25 years of age, should have the opportunity to give two years of service to any of a wide range of national programs aimed at enriching family and community life for all Americans through improvements in education, health, nutrition, housing and other basic areas of living. Such programs will not only provide a better life for more citizens, but will also provide more avenues to effective participation for younger adults. The college campus is too often a kind of vector where many able and eager young people simply fly a holding pattern with binoculars focused on society's deficiencies while awaiting landing instructions. There is little chance to learn by personal experience either the toughness of the problems or the power of individual efforts. If a person has no chance to assess his own efforts on difficult problems, it is easy to blame injustice on others. Young Americans see these ills. Why not attempt to provide the machinery by which they may be a part of the solution -- not a part of the problem.

<u>Add to the Variety of Higher Education</u>. New institutions are needed which would be accepted and recognized in their own right for the services they perform. Service institutions are needed at the neighborhood level, where programs of nutrition, child care and health can be brought within

reach of every disadvantaged home, where literacy can be taught to older citizens, where remedial work can be made a part of the preparation and support of learners at all levels, where the elderly can be counseled and where those who can help others will have a facility in which to work. Research institutions are needed at local, state and national levels where work on various problems, both immediate and long-range, can be pursued without taking time away from professors and scholars who would otherwise be occupied in the classroom. Unless the research now being done on the campus has some direct contribution to make to the instructional or scholarly activities of the university it should be done elsewhere. Teaching institutions are needed where admission is open to adults of all ages, where both part-time and full-time students can find opportunity for independent study, remedial work, or cultural enrichment, and where vocational advancement can be had at low cost. Until and unless such new institutions are within easy reach of the citizenry, programs in the liberal arts will continue to serve as the scapegoats for an inadequate educational system. The university as now constituted is clearly inadequate to meet these new requirements of society. What it would cost to make the university adequate would be much more than the cost of the new institutions discussed here — and because of the many compromises required, the results would be less than satisfactory.

Lower the Financial Barrier to More Education. A national scholarship program for disadvantaged college-age men and women, both rural and urban, is needed now. Boys and girls of all ages and their parents should know that high costs will not prevent them from gaining admission to further education, provided interest, motivation, and achievement make the program selected a reasonable choice. To the poverty-bound home of the inner city or of Appalachia, the price of transportation or suitable clothing may be a deterrent too great for some young people to overcome. In our desperation to provide remedial education at a later age or to give job training to the "hard core unemployed" we are learning that several thousand dollars per year is small cost where such programs are successful, and yet failures in such efforts, no matter how much is spent, are all too frequent when the training is delayed too long. How much more productive it would be to spend less per year but spend it in time to insure better results.

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Scholarship programs that would help young men and women to become self-supporting and self-respecting citizens, and which would contain built-in safeguards against abuses, could bring training and education within reach of many Americans for whom such opportunity is now only a dream or an accident.

More Education Earlier. A greatly enlarged program of early childhood education, as well as pre-natal care, is essential to the further education of many youngsters today and absolutely vital if society is to be spared the continued burden of an increasing number of adults who are without the skills and knowledge necessary for responsible citizenship. Children, abandoned to the violent world of television, lacking in adult companionship and eating an imbalanced, self-selected diet, are not found alone in disadvantaged homes. They are the children of middle-class homes as well. Far reaching new programs of early childhood education would not only serve well the needs of the children involved, they would also awaken parents and neighbors to the activities of their children and their real progress. As society offers more opportunities at the top of the educational ladder, so must the base be broadened and strengthened.

Programs such as these will be enormously expensive. But one way or another we shall pay for them, and money is a far cheaper price to pay than living in a society increasingly characterized by cynicism, frustration, hate and despair.

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